

Iran Forges Tajik Links

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Tehran forges closer links with Tajikistan in an effort to advance its economic and security interests in the region

Tehran, which backed the opposition in Tajikistan's bloody civil war, is working hard to strengthen relations with Dushanbe in what analysts see as a drive to expand its influence in the region.

A series of high level political and economic visits were set up following last December's meeting between President Mohammed Khatami and President Immomali Rakhmonov in Iran.

"We are strategically important and profitable for one another," Iran's Ambassador to Tajikistan Saidrasul Musavi said of the growing relations between the two states.

In the next few weeks, Iranian Defense Minister Alia Shakhoni is scheduled to visit Dushanbe while the Tajik parliamentary speaker is expected to travel to Tehran.

Iran sees Tajikistan as an important ally in its attempts to secure stability in Central Asia. Tehran believes this is vital if it is to extend its political influence in the region.

Both countries are involved in the regional security alliance "Six plus Two" group which has been charged with the task of conflict resolution.

The group (which comprises Russia, US, China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) is particularly concerned with the Taliban threat.

Afghanistan, 95 per cent of which is controlled by the Islamic movement, shares a loosely controlled 1500 kilometre border with Tajikistan.

Tehran also needs regional stability to enable it to develop its economic interests in the region.

The countries of Central Asia have recently redoubled efforts to agree on ways of harnessing the Caspian Basin's oil and gas reserves. Iran is keen to capitalise on this and had been vying to clinch part of a pipeline deal.

Tehran is also eager to exploit Tajikistan's huge mineral wealth, in particular its Uranium deposits which could prove useful to Iran's efforts to develop its nuclear capabilities.

Ties between the two states go back to the early nineties. Iran was one of the first countries to recognize Tajikistan's independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and, with a common language, culture and traditions, it began to play an increasingly important role in the political life of the country.

Iran's national bank, radio, TV and news agency all have offices in Dushanbe, while many overseas

businessmen working there are Iranian.

The friendship though almost came to an abrupt halt with outbreak Tajikistan's bloody civil war. During the conflict, which began soon after independence and continued until late 1996, Iran backed the United Tajik Opposition, providing its leaders with a safe haven.

"Iran was hoping that, in the event of a victory of the Tajik opposition, power would have been taken by a person loyal to Iran and, in this case, Tajikistan would have become a totally pro-Iranian country," an analyst, who asked not to be named, told IWPR.

"I think that all of the (recent) actions taken by Iran towards Tajikistan are connected to its desire to spread its influence here and to protect its own interests."

According to the analyst, the Tajik war would have continued much longer if it had not been for the Afghan conflict.

Russia and Iran both backed the anti-Taliban coalition of Afghan President Burkhanuddin Rabbani. As the Taliban grew in strength, the two countries abandoned their struggle for influence in Tajikistan to direct their efforts towards Afghanistan.

"Iran and Russia realised the armed conflict in Tajikistan was not in their interest and made strenuous efforts to persuade the conflicting Tajik sides to sit down at the negotiating table and sign a peace agreement," the analyst said. The original ceasefire agreement was signed in Tehran.

With the end of the war in Tajikistan, Iran redoubled its efforts to establish its influence here

Iran stands to reap huge economic and political advantages from gaining a strong foothold in central Asia. And the current round of high-level political and diplomatic visits may well serve to enhance Tehran's role in the region.

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